

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1955

A FEELING FOR SOUND, MUSIC

Georgia's Byron H. Reece Is One of Greatest U.S. Poets

THE SEASON OF FLESH. By Byron Herbert Reece. E. P. Dutton & Co. New York. 96 pages. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RALPH MCGILL

A prophet, says an old axiom, is not without honor save in his own community. Unhappily, the axiom is even more applicable to poets, who are more important than prophets.

All of which is by way of saying that Byron Herbert Reece, of Rte. 1, Blairsville, Ga., and one of the nation's few really fine poets, has produced another volume of verse—"The Season of Flesh."

Edwin Case, one of the better-known reviewers, whose reviews appear in about 20 newspapers over the country, said of Reece: "I know of no living poet writing in the English language, or pretending to, who has written lyrics equal to the best poems in 'The Season of Flesh.' It seems to me that with the exception of Robert Frost, Reece is our greatest living poet, and even Frost is not so pure a lyricist, nor as strong and lonely a voice."

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I USE THIS BECAUSE somehow, human nature being what it is, the home citizens always seem to lay greater store by an outside voice, or give ear to strange prophets, rather than their own. I agree with the measure of Reece. He proved it long ago in "Bow Down In Jericho," "A Song of Joy," "The Ballad of the Bones" and various poems published in magazines about the



BYRON REECE
Powerful Lyricist

country.

One of the troubles is, of course, that so many neurotic persons, especially frustrated dowagers, have fouled up the word poetry by calling their own flood of rhymes "poetry." The average American somehow withdraws from poetry, having been subject, perhaps, to his wife's verses, or to some of those written by her clubwomen associates. The result is that poets have a hard time of it.

Reece's poems ought to be on the shelf of every person who likes poetry, especially those in the lyric and ballad form. He is beyond any argument one of the great poets of our day, and it is

high time a lot of people—especially those in his home state—find it out. We lay great store by buying Georgia hams, chickens and the like, and there is an even better reason to buy great poetry . . . which will feed the spirit and which will last as long as a man can read.

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IF THIS SOUNDS like a tirade, that's because it is one. There is no reason why dead poets of the 16th and 17th centuries should receive most of the attention.

Reece was born where he lives—near Blairsville, Ga. He is a farmer and a writer. He graduated at Young Harris College and while a student there some of his poems were being published in nationally circulated magazines. God alone understands how talent gets into a man, but Reece has a feeling for sounds, for color and music. The folk rhythms, folk themes, the nuances of life, the feeling for the old forms and the language of poetry—all these Reece has.

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"AS MARY WAS AWALKING," a carol, is one of the more beautiful of the new volume, "The Wayfarer." "The Seven Days of the Week" . . . these and many more are wonderful to read—and read again.

Reece can talk with stones, brooks, trees, clouds, people and, with spirits . . . and they help him write, I guess. The critics of New York and of other great cities know him and honor him. I find myself wishing his own people would write, or call in person for his book—great poets are not many.

Wednesday, June 4, 1958 The Atlanta Journal 3

Poet-Farmer Herb Reece Dies of Gunshot at Home

By FRANK DANIEL
Atlanta Journal Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS, June 4—A ballad about youth's passing—"The wing of the eagle is not more swift"—was among the last literary preoccupations of north Georgia's esteemed poet and novelist, Byron Herbert Reece.

Forty-year-old Herb Reece—as he was known among the uplanders of hilly Choestoe District—was found dead of a gunshot wound in his thin, ailing chest in his apartment on the campus of Young Harris College, where he was a part-time lecturer in English.

Reece, who had known youth's familiar joys so scantily, but whose tall, gangling body had burned with the ecstasies and exaltations of a young man's passion for learning, hardly outlived his own distinguished youth.

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IF BYRON HERBERT Reece wrote ballads in the style his forebears sang en route from England and Scotland to Georgia's crags and glens, he was a dirt farmer, too, who would boast of his farm as the best in his region of Union County, where he was born, and who plowed and planted its field with the same dedication he gave to the words and music of his language.

Dr. C. R. Clegg, president of
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Staff Photo—John Neel

HERB REECE ON HIS NORTH GEORGIA FARM
Photo Taken During Reporter's Visit Last Month

POET REECE DIES

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Young Harris College, said a gun was found near the body, about 11 p.m. Tuesday. He added that Reece had been in poor health in recent years and had been despondent.

He said Fred Emiston, faculty member and close friend of the poet's found the body. Towns County Sheriff Ketron W. Shook said a .32-caliber pistol lay near Reece's head.

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CORONER Frank Abenrathy, also the local Undertaker, planned an inquest. Abernathy Funeral Home at Hiawassee was in charge of arrangements.

Reece's first book of verse appeared at the end of World War II, published by Dutton. Jesse Stuart, famed Kentucky novelist, had recommended Reece's work to the publishers. He also wrote the introduction to the volume.

This was "The Ballad of the Bones and Other Poems," and its impact was immediate and impressive. Reece employed the humor and the deep piety of his region with the freshness of a young and scholarly spirit. He often expressed his debt to many poets, including A. E. Housman.

One of his first poems began:

*"Far off high misty mad-
rigals*

*Wake in the cloudy atmos-
phere*

of leaf-light under rain

*that falls gently
Through the darkening
air. . ."*

The Biblical style he absorbed in the religious atmosphere where he grew up was reflected in lines like:

*"In the battle's shock
In the ways they grope*

I am their Rock

I am their Hope!

"Their blood I see

I hear their groans

Yea, and I am He

That raised the Bones."

* * *

SOON after "The Ballad of the Bones" appeared, Atlanta Journal columnist Hugh Park visited Reece and wrote a memorable article about Georgia's "Wolf Creek Poet." Of him he said:

"The Georgian follows no set meter in his poetry. He goes by the sound of it, and he is its own critic. When he had finished 'The Ballad of the Bones' he showed it to his mother. 'What do you think of it, Maw?' he asked. Mrs. Reece, as slender and as gentle of spirit as her son, said, 'It's something.' She took the poem seven miles to Blairsville to editor Charlie Bartholomew, of the Union County Citizen, and he said, 'It's too wonderful to be true.'"

Reece was then 28 years old. His mother, who died in 1954, always encouraged her son's literary efforts, even when his father, Juan W. Reece, demurred that Herb would never make much money out of books. "Money isn't everything," Mrs. Emma Reece insisted. The book was dedicated "To Juan and Emma."

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AT THIS TIME, in his attic room with low oak rafters, was a bust of Shelley, the gift of the California poet Alfred Brush, family pictures, and his books.

Mr. Reece published several subsequent volumes of poetry; "Bow Down in Jericho," "The Season of Flesh," and "A Song of Joy and other Poems" among them. He wrote two novels, "A Dinner of Herbs" and "The Hawk and the Sun."

He was at Young Harris under a Guggenheim Fellowship and was at work on a prose trilogy. Georgia and Atlanta had conferred many literary distinctions upon this writer.

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HE WAS WINNER of the Georgia Distinguished Writers Award in both poetry and prose.

Reece's family had lived in and around Blairsville in Union County for over a century. He attended Young Harris College, working on the family farm to help defray expenses.

He once expressed the feeling that his failure to get into military services during World War II, because of his relatively frail physique, and because he had to stay home to help run the farm, was one of the "greatest regrets of his life."

Mr. Reece had written many book reviews for The Atlanta Journal.

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MR. REECE was very fond of music, and officials at Young Harris College said Wednesday phonograph records were found on and about his record player

Tuesday night, as if he had been listening to music before his death.

Mr. Reece last weekend attended graduation exercises at North Georgia College, in Dah-

lonega. His older sister was being graduated cum laude from the institution.

Graduation exercises were in progress at Young Harris. Mr. Reece had smilingly observed to

friends that he felt "he'd attended about all the graduation exercises he could stand."

Mr. Reece's mother is said to have died of tuberculosis, friends recalled Wednesday. Mr. Reece

had been admitted to Battey Hospital in Rome for treatment of this disease two or three years ago. He had a certificate stating that his illness had been arrested.

Byron Herbert Reece: A Life Of Purpose

BY DOTTIE COLWELL, YOUNG HARRIS COLLEGE
(From The Enotah Echoes)

To those of us who were fortunate enough to know him, Byron Herbert Reece's life and sudden passing seem like a dream. It is hard for us to realize that less than four months ago he lived with us on the campus, and walked among us, touching our young lives with his genius and giving of himself through his teaching. It is hard to remember—and impossible to forget.

Mr. Reece loved Young Harris College. More than that, he loved North Georgia: the mountains, the foothills, the fields, the forests, the earth itself. Especially did he love his own little valley, almost hidden by the big mountains, where he worked and wrote. On his farm he lived simply from day to day, content with what was his, but dreaming of something better. From this, his homeland, he took everyday things and wove them into rare bits of magic through his writing.

Although his formal education was somewhat limited, Mr. Reece possessed a far greater gift—that of understanding human nature. His poems are personal, not only to him, but to the human race in general. To him, the universe and man's very existence therein was a mystery which constantly amazed him.

Mr. Reece gained a measure of literary fame during his life, but he never seemed to be affected by it. He taught in order to make a living, for although he was widely known as an outstanding writer, fame does not always bring riches. His first love was not teaching, but his poetry. Many times he said that if any of his works would be remembered after he was gone, it would be these poems, written from his heart.

Like many other great people, Mr. Reece had his own "thorn in the flesh" his weak and pain ridden body. He realized the seriousness of this handicap, for in one of his early volumes of poetry, he wrote:

"Three times already I have outwitted death..

But the time will come when he will creep upon me and I not see.

Then he will pluck my life as a leaf from a tree.."

This awareness that his days were numbered was a constant source of worry to this sensitive man. He tried to live each day to the fullest, writing all that he could while he had time. But he never stopped hoping that he would recover until the last days of his life. During his last period of hospitalization, he wrote:

"And O for a leaf of healing
A leaf from that healing tree
That grows by the river of waters
That flows by the city of life!"

Mr. Reece never found his "leaf of healing." The ties of memory are strong, and we find ourselves wondering why a person with such a brilliant mind and so much talent should have had so short a life. I am thankful that I knew him. His life, though brief, was one with purpose and meaning. This, after all, is the important thing.

Death plucked Mr. Reece's life "as a leaf from a tree," but I know that as long as his unforgettable writings exist, he, too, shall live.